



Istawā according to the Salaf and the Khalaf ¹

Imām `Alī al-Qārī

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‘Alī al-Ushī said:

*wa-rabbul ‘arshi fawqal ‘arshi lākin
bi-lā wasf al-tamakkuni wal tisāli*

*The Lord of Throne is on the Throne, but,
Without the attribute of 'holding unto' or 'touching' it.²*

Lord of the Throne’ that is, the Creator and the Owner of the Throne. The associate is similar to *Lord of the House*’ or *Lord of Jibril*.’ The Throne is the greatest thing in the creation and that which encompasses everything. Allāh Ta`ālā has said:

“**Al-Rahmān** has made *istawā*’ on the Throne.” ³

The *madhab* of the *khalaf* is to explain *istawā* as subduing (*isti’lā*) and the chosen position of the *salaf* is not to explain it at all. Rather, to believe it as it has been revealed, that it is transcendent and unqualified (*tanzīh*) which negates similitude (*tashbih*) and to submit the matter (*tawhid*) towards Allāh and His Knowledge concerning its meaning. Just like Imām Mālik has said:

“Istawā is known; its modality is unknown; to ask about it is heresy;
to believe in it is mandatory.”

This is also the opinion of our Imām al-A`zam [Abū Hanīfa] regarding this and all such abstruse verses and traditions like ‘hand’ ‘eyes’ ‘face’ among other such attributes. The word ‘upon’ (*fawq*) is used like *He is Overpowering upon His slaves*⁴ or *They fear their Lord from above them*.⁵ Our elders did not explain the word ‘upon’ or ‘above’ as Greatness or Exaltedness like the latter scholars did.

The author replaced a synonym for the word used in the Qur’ān to align it with the poetic meter and then, he clarified the position by saying in the following distich: *Above,*

¹ `Alī al-Qārī, *daw al-ma’āli*

² `Alī al-Ushī, *bad’il amāli*

³ Qur’ān, *Sūrat Taha* 20:5

⁴ Qur’ān, *Sūrat al-An`ām* 6:18

⁵ Qur’ān, *Sūrat Al-Nahl*, 16:50

and it does not mean ‘to take hold’ or ‘to touch.’ That is it doesn’t mean ‘to rest’ or the aspect of ‘reaching’ because these descriptions are inconceivable (*muhāl*) concerning Allah Ta`ālā.

In this verse is also the refutation of Karrāmiyya and the Mujassima who attest a ‘direction’ (*jīhal*) to Allāh Ta`ālā. Thus, the Karrāmiyya attest the direction of height to Allāh without settling (*istigrār*) on the Throne. And the Mujassima, they are the Hashwiyya, insist that Allāh Ta`ālā ‘settled’ quoting the verse and taking its literal meaning even though they have no proof for that. Because *istawā* has many meanings among which is the meaning of overpowering, subduing, control etc. like the poet says:

*qad istawā bishrun `alāl irāqi
min ghayri sayfin wa-damīn mihrāqi*

*Bishr has subdued and overpowered Iraq,
Without using the sword or bloodshed.*

Similarly is the saying of Allāh, ‘and when he reached his youth, and reached his full strength’⁶ where *istawā* is used to mean ‘complete’ or ‘perfected’; and the saying of Allāh, ‘and it settled upon the mount Judi’⁷ where it means, ‘settled.’ Therefore one cannot use this as conclusive evidence when there is a possibility of having so many different meanings.

If someone asks: ‘Then what is the reason of these abstruse (*mutashābihāt*) verses being revealed?’ I answer: This is to show the incapacity and powerlessness of the creation and their shortfall of their intellect in grasping the meaning of the Divine Speech of their Lord, and to prove their slavery and their faith. Like the most knowledgeable among them say: ‘We bear faith [in all that has been revealed]. All of this is from our Lord’

They submit (*tafwid*) to Allāh and believe in the intended meaning of Allāh without trying to understand the meaning itself. And this is the highest perfection a slave can attain. And this is the chosen position among our *salaf* and they turned away from describing or elucidating the meanings of abstruse verses. However, the latter scholars chose to explain these verses without insisting or being assertive about it claiming this is how it was intended by the Lord, glorified is He.

Slavehood (*`ubūdiyya*) is far more robust than worship; because slavehood entails ‘being pleased with what the Lord does’ and worship is ‘doing what may please the Lord.’ Surely, pleasure of Allāh (*riddā*) is far greater than actions and deeds (*‘amal*); so much so that forsaking *riddā* is apostasy, but forsaking action, [this] is disobedience and sin (*fisq*). Therefore, there is an end to worship, there is no worship in the hereafter, but there is no end to slavehood in either of the two worlds. It is crystal clear that the *madhab* of our *salaf* is the safest and the learned; whereas the *madhab* of the *khalaf* is excellent and more accurate.

Allāh Ta`ālā knows best.



⁶ Qur’ān, *Surat al-Qasas* 28:14

⁷ Qur’ān, *Surat Hūd* 11:44